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### On a mission

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## On a Mission

### A Manifesto for Autoethnography

Jonathan Wyatt

**Abstract** A manifesto for an autoethnography that moves, that lives in the shadows, and does both with urgency, which leads me to note that this manifesto declares itself not to be a manifesto.

**Keywords:** *autoethnography, politics, event, process, threshold, stand-up*

The goal is to change the world through the way we write about it. (Denzin, 2010, p. 90)

A few minutes are all I have. All we have. All there is. All that's possible amongst the passing of the everyday, the commonplace of working, living, loving, and losing. A commonplace cushioned by privilege and comfort. The ordinary, gilded.

The stopping of a bus outside the ground-floor apartment window; approach, deceleration, idling (one, two, three, four, five seconds, is all), acceleration. Receding. Gone. Other than that, this spring dawn, nothing. Except the high-pitched ringing in middle-aged ears. Is all there is.

Ssshhh. There must be more. Must be something more to hear. Or see. Or taste, touch, smell. Something more that can be *sensed*. Sensed between the senses. Intuited. The challenge is to find what is not *there*, not available. Not obvious. Not noticeable.

The challenge is to find what can't be anticipated. To allow whatever it is, and whatever I might mean by 'it', to come into awareness.

The challenge is to find it in time. There are minutes left. Just minutes. Counting down, one by one by one.

What is not obvious, what is not available, what is *possible*, is not yet, by definition, clear. What is possible may not ever become – what is the word? May not ever become – *manifest*. It's a risk we take in writing. In living. The manifest suggests the obvious. Clarity is not everything. We need the hidden and the obscured too. That's where the possible may lie. The promise. The hope. The surprise.

The surprise may not be welcome, of course. It may be, but not necessarily. What is obscured may be difficult, fearful, disturbing.

A *manifesto* declares. It renders manifest. It is a declaration. A pronouncement.

This is not one of those. This is not a manifesto of the apparent, but a manifesto of the *occluded*. A contradiction in terms. An oxymoron. It would be better to call it not a manifesto for autoethnography but an *occludo* for autoethnography. A shadow declaration. A declaration of the lurking. A pronouncement for the concealed. Composed in the dark, for the dark – for those of us, or those parts of us, that dwell there – because the dark is where the ordinary and the everyday, the personal and the cultural, the affective and the visceral, hang out too.

This is an *occludo* for an autoethnography that works in the margins, that falls through the cracks, that misses the point. An *occludo* for an autoethnography that works in thresholds, an autoethnography that *thresholds*. ‘Thresholding’ as process, always moving, always folding and unfolding, folding and unfolding (Ken Gale, personal communication).

Autoethnography that, with Patti Lather (2007), becomes lost, seeking truths that can only be half-said, truths that lie beyond meaning, truths that can only be found as our attention lies elsewhere, viewed askance; Medusa truths that can only be glimpsed as images glance one off the other; truths that reveal themselves to us only in their own time, when they’re ready, and only because we have learnt how to look. Or how not to look.

Perhaps this pitch for the obscured connects with how, these days, I find myself relentlessly drawn to thinking, living, with stand-up. Not all stand-up. Live stand-up. Not stand-up where you lie on the sofa in your living room watching the eminent and the celebrated on TV. No, stand-up where you need to be rammed into a crowd, perched in a corner by the bar, a beer clutched to your chest, craning your neck round the pillar that blocks your view of the stage as the next unknown act is cheered onto the tiny semicircular wooden stage to the opening bars of ‘Heart of Glass’.

Not acts you watch on your phone, YouTube clips with half a million views; stand-up in darkened basements on miserable January Monday evenings, where you trek up the hill with your coat drawn around you against the piercing wind. Stand-up where you drop from the street down grubby concrete stairs and dip your head below the hobbit door. Here is where we might find an *occludo* for autoethnography; here’s where we would see an *occludo* at ease, hunched at a table at the side, writing, dropping allusions from the page onto the grimy floor.

An autoethnography of the basement comedy club resists the *stasis* of the manifest. The manifest is. The manifest is, like, *there*. Here it is, the manifest claims. Let

me be 'transparent', it says. This is who I am. Let me tell you how it is, how it should be, how it will be, so there can be no doubt. The manifesto says let me tell you how it is so you can call me to account when I fail to deliver on what I declare. The manifesto sets us up.

Instead, in the sweaty, cramped underbelly of a city basement comedy club and, now, in this silence of this morning as the clouds gather, as I am trying to notice, writing, both are events where we attend not to what is but to what might emerge, what might erupt. We look, listen, feel for the *emergent*. This is not a manifesto, then, but nor is it only an *occludo*. It is an *emergento*, a call for autoethnography that does not hold still, a summons for autoethnography that transforms, an autoethnography of process. Whose direction cannot be predicted. Whose shape shifts. Whose claim is for what befalls not what is. Whose claim is not for the contained, unified, essentialist first-person subject but for the subject as immanent event-in-process (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

This is an *emergento* for autoethnography. Hear not only 'emergent' but 'urgent' and 'emergency'. Hear what is at stake. Hear the call for pace. Autoethnography that not only embodies the emergent but the exigent, the pressing; autoethnography on a mission. Hear the *emergento's* challenge to complacency, its impatience with satisfaction, its intolerance of contentment. Hear its restlessness. Hear its rage.

Go see *Occludo* and *Emergento*, coming soon to a cinema near you. *Occludo* and *Emergento*, the new unstoppable pair of Marvel autoethnographic superheroes who, backed by their strong, reliable, necessary but unsubtle sidekick Manifesto, battle it out together against their arch-enemies, Stasis and Complacento, as they respond to Professor 'Xavier' Denzin's call for a paradigm that sees autoethnography as inquiry, activism, critique, 'critical citizenship', and empowering and inspiring social imagination (Denzin, 2010).

Go. Go now. But travel light, and be sure to take the side streets, where the shadows lie.

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## About the Author

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Jonathan Wyatt is a senior lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. His article with Beatrice Allegranti, 'Witnessing Loss: A Materialist Feminist Account', won the 2015 Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award. Among his recent books is *On (Writing) Families: Autoethnographies of Presence and Absence, Love and Loss*, co-edited with Tony Adams and published by Sense.